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# DIRECTORS OF COOPERATIVES AND THEIR WIVES - A Good

## Member Relations Team

BY IRWIN W. RUST

FARMER COOPERATIVE SERVICE  
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

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Farmer Cooperative Service conducts research; advises directly with cooperative leaders and others; promotes cooperative organization and development through other Federal and State agencies; and publishes results of its research, issues *News for Farmer Cooperatives*, and other education material.

This work is aimed (1) to help farmers get better prices for their products and reduce operating expenses, (2) to help rural and small-town residents use cooperatives to develop rural resources, (3) to help these cooperatives expand their services and operate more efficiently, and (4) to help all Americans understand the work of these cooperatives.

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## Foreword

This is one of a series of circulars on cooperative directors based on information developed during the 1964 series of member relations conferences sponsored jointly by Farmer Cooperative Service and the American Institute of Cooperation. The theme of the conferences was "The Director's Role in Member Relations."

This circular is intended to stimulate thinking rather than give answers to specific problems. The ideas expressed represent opinions of responsible cooperative leaders, educators, and others, based for the most part on their own experiences in day-to-day operating situations.

Most of the material was taken from speeches given at the 1964 conferences or from ideas brought out during the discussion periods. The following cooperative leaders presented many of the ideas expressed herein.

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## **Contents**

	Page
The cooperative provides information .....	2
Facts that are needed .....	2
How to present facts .....	3
The member relations team works at home .....	3
Cooperative business .....	4
Family education .....	4
It participates at the cooperative .....	5
Membership meetings .....	5
Special activities .....	6
Improving facilities .....	8
It does public relations .....	9
Youth activities .....	10
Talks, tours, and surveys .....	10
Informal personal contacts .....	11

# **Directors of Cooperatives and Their Wives - A Good Member Relations Team**

**by Irwin W. Rust**

Cooperative directors working to build more effective member relations programs are beginning to realize that they have been overlooking one of the most valuable resources available to them—their own wives.

In today's highly competitive world, women are assuming ever greater responsibility for educating the children, family business affairs, and community welfare. Why shouldn't they be equally interested in participating actively in a cooperative that is an important part of their farm enterprise?

Actually, they are. All that is required to tap this reservoir of talent, intelligence, and willingness is some effort on the part of the cooperative to provide basic information and an opportunity to serve.

Wives can be of immeasurable help with the details of cooperative business that directors handle at home. They can work with their husbands at cooperative meetings and in other organized activities. And they can be great public relations assets to the cooperative through their contacts in the community.

A few cooperatives elect women to their boards of directors, and we know at least one association that elects husband-wife teams for its directors and officers. If both attend a meeting, the husband usually acts officially; if the husband cannot attend, the wife takes over the duties of director, secretary, treasurer, or president—and does a highly commendable job.

Ordinarily, however, wives are serving in less formal but no less meaningful capacities. This publication describes some of

the member relations programs in which they are working successfully with their director-husbands, and how the cooperatives have started the programs. It also presents some suggestions from cooperative leaders on other ways director-wife teams can serve.

## The Cooperative Provides Information



"Let the average woman know your story and to whom you want this story told and she will tell it," a cooperative leader says. "But you must give her a chance and the facts."

If a cooperative wants directors' wives to help with the member relations programs, it must first train them. This can be simple and informal but must include the information wives will need if they are to speak for the cooperative.

## Facts That Are Needed

First of all, directors' wives need to understand provisions of the bylaws and articles of incorporation. Then they need to know the principles and ideals of cooperatives in general, the goals of the cooperative of which they are members, what services and products it offers, and how well it is accomplishing its purpose.

They need to understand how cooperatives help improve farm efficiency and productivity and how this contributes to a higher standard of living for everyone. They need to know how cooperative research or experimentation will benefit consumers, and how Government programs affect agriculture.

Finally, they need to learn that there are times to listen and times to speak. They must be discreet in what they say, and should be careful not to repeat what their husbands may tell them in confidence about pending contracts or proposed programs. But they should be encouraged to defend cooperatives against any misstatement of fact or unwarranted criticism.

## How To Present Facts

Directors may be able to give their own wives the information they need to function effectively on the member relations team. But—as with driving an automobile—it is probably better to learn from someone else.

One effective method is for the member relations director or manager of the cooperative to set up a series of briefing sessions for the wives as a group. Time should be provided for a question period at the end of every class session and fact sheets, board manuals, and any other printed matter should be given the directors' wives to take home and review.

Attending one or two board meetings with their husbands offers wives real on-the-job training in how the cooperative functions. A cooperative editor who recommends this comments, "Women have inquisitive minds and they won't just sit silently through a board meeting. They will ask questions and offer suggestions." (And it has been known to happen that when directors tried to answer those questions, they discovered they should have done a little more homework beforehand.)

Some cooperatives also encourage wives to attend State council meetings, where special programs are planned for them, and the annual meetings of the American Institute of Cooperation. Experiences at such meetings add to their knowledge and increase their enthusiasm for working with their husbands on cooperative projects.

Attending such meetings offers fringe benefits, also. Getting acquainted with directors and wives from other associations and meeting cooperative leaders gives wives a new perspective. Some who may have felt aggrieved and protested that they were "coop widows" left alone to oversee farm work while their husbands were engaged in cooperative activities take a different attitude when they learn more about the cooperative and are given an opportunity to participate themselves.

**The Member  
Relations Team  
Works at Home**



A director does much more cooperative work at home than many people realize. A wife who is interested in the coopera-

tive and well informed about its activities can help with many of these tasks.

Not to be disregarded is the member relations work directors and their wives do at home around their own family dinner table. There they lay the groundwork for the cooperative leadership of tomorrow.

## Cooperative Business

Mail and telephone calls on cooperative business are inescapable parts of a director's job. They can also become burdensome. Unquestionably, a wife can be of great help to her director-husband if she is qualified and willing to take over some of this member relations work.

For example, women usually see mail first. If a wife is interested in the cooperative, she is not likely to tuck communications from it away and forget them. Instead, she will read them and call her husband's attention to them. At particularly busy times, she may "predigest" this mail for him, marking important items for him to see or giving him a resume.

Many membership meeting details can be handled by directors' wives. They can help mail out notices, write personal letters, and make telephone calls.

Cooperatives that are having trouble with attendance have found telephone committees of directors' wives very helpful. Telling a member or his wife what is going to be discussed at the meeting and urging them to come is far more persuasive than a mimeographed notice. People like personal invitations.

If a director is to make a report or speech at a meeting, his wife can often help organize the material or do some of the research.

An official of a rural electric cooperative speaks particularly highly of the member relations work his directors' wives do by telephone. He points out that members of a rural electric cooperative may live 100 miles from the distribution headquarters. Their main contact with the association is through the directors. Wives of directors are of great assistance in keeping these members well informed and interested.

## Family Education

A director's wife can be a real power in developing cooperative mindedness in young members of the family.

A member relations staff director suggests that parents might make a practice of occasionally guiding family conversation into a discussion of cooperative principles, goals, and developments. If the cooperative has a junior program, children can be en-

couraged to contribute reports of their own activities and thus be real participants in the discussion.

Cooperative newsletters and magazines frequently have special articles of interest to wives and young people. These, too, are good subjects for family discussions.

When parents show interest and enthusiasm in a subject or activity, children usually do also.

## It Participates at the Cooperative



When we speak of directors' wives helping in member relations work at the cooperative, our first thought is probably of membership meetings. They can, indeed, be of great help there.

But they also assist in other capacities.

Projects to improve cooperative facilities and make them more attractive often appeal to directors' wives. So do planning special programs and working with their husbands to encourage young farmers to take a more active part in the association.

Some cooperatives have women's auxiliaries which look to wives of directors for leadership.

## Membership Meetings

Cooperatives frequently ask wives of board members to serve refreshments at membership meetings. There is nothing wrong with this—but wives can do far more than preside at a coffee table.

## Welcoming Committees

Directors' wives also can do more than stimulate attendance at membership meetings by forming telephone committees to extend personal invitations. They can carry this project a step farther by serving as a welcoming committee at the meeting. Members like to be greeted at the door and made to feel their presence is important.

A member relations staff representative reports that his cooperative makes a special effort to encourage directors' wives to be present at the annual meeting and help receive members.

The manager's wife gives a tea for wives of directors immediately preceding the meeting. Then the wives are urged to go to the meeting together and serve as a welcoming committee.

The very presence of a wife with her director-husband has a good member relations effect, in the opinion of another cooperative leader. This is evidence of the cooperative's role as a family enterprise, he thinks. He speaks also of the value of having his wife alongside him to refresh his memory for names and to reassure him and give him confidence as he is called upon to speak.

## Programs for Women

Planning special programs for women is a natural assignment for directors' wives. One association reports that for about 5 years wives of directors and company personnel have been serving on a committee to plan meaningful activities for women attending its annual meeting. Over that period, attendance at the meetings has increased impressively.

Cooperative leaders recommend that planned activities for women should not be limited to light entertainment and sightseeing. A program on how the cooperative functions can be a real drawing card. But the advice from those who have tried this is—be careful not to talk down to the women.

We cite the traumatic experience of a public relations staff member of a State association who made a 30-minute presentation—in terms he thought suitably simple—at a morning coffee for women. Then he politely asked if there were any questions. There were. Many.

An hour and a half later, when it was time for another scheduled activity, he was still trying to provide intelligent answers to intelligent, pertinent questions about all phases of the cooperative's activities.

And as the women were leaving, he overheard one say, "This is the sort of program we should have, but they should send a speaker who can answer *all* our questions."

Tours of the cooperative's facilities, with explanations of the various operations, also are popular with women.

## Special Activities

Directors and their wives can—and do—participate in a variety of other activities related to the cooperative.

## Programs for Young Farmers

Almost without exception, young farmers who are members of cooperatives today had nothing to do with their organization

or its early struggles to get established. As one young member says, "Many of us have fallen heir to a good thing without really knowing how it came about in the first place. We just accept it."

In several cooperatives, directors and their wives have helped with special programs designed to provide these younger members with a broader cooperative background and bring them into a closer relationship with the association.

**Conferences.**—One widely known regional organization promotes 2-day conferences in various locations for young members and wives who are believed to have leadership potential. Cooperative leaders review the history of their cooperative and direct discussions of present activities and future prospects.

Directors of local associations and their wives help with these sessions.

**Director-Led Meetings.**—Directors and their wives have major responsibility for a program for young farmers being carried out on a local level under sponsorship of a Midwest state-wide federated association.

One of the leaders of the association describes the underlying purpose of these meetings thus: "Nothing happens in a cooperative or a community until people get together. Getting rural citizens organized, meeting together, and communicating with each other is therefore basic to the cooperative."

Under this plan, three directors and their wives each invite three younger couples to a luncheon or dinner meeting. The local cooperative manager welcomes the guests and the directors introduce their own wives and the couples they invited. There is a carefully planned program that tells the cooperative story, usually with the help of visual aids.

Directors make followup visits after the meeting.

Local associations that have held these meetings report greater interest among the young farmers, increased patronage, and improved member relations.

## Study Groups

After completing their own basic training and discovering how little they had known about the cooperative, several groups of directors' wives have started study groups so wives of other members can become better informed.

These groups might also study such problems as those a widow faces in settling an estate, a cooperative manager suggests. He mentions his own experience in trying to advise widows who are completely unfamiliar with business and legal matters and who do not even understand what their husbands have invested in the cooperative or what the investment means to them.

The manager usually helps set up and teach these study groups, or a representative from regional headquarters serves as instructor. Sometimes a panel of directors assists.

A report from a cooperative leader points up the need for better education among wives of members. She queried some 1,200 women in 5 States concerning their reactions to an article in a national magazine attacking cooperatives. About 1 out of every 20 of the women had read the article. Not a single one of them (and some were directors' wives) had written a letter to the editor defending cooperatives.

## Women's Auxiliaries

A women's auxiliary can be a fine adjunct to a cooperative, and wives of directors can perform a valuable member relations function as leaders.

Since not many cooperatives now have women's auxiliaries, we shall explain in some detail how one State association has set up this program.

**Organized on Local Basis.**—The auxiliaries are organized on a local basis. (The State association has about 30 locals.) Usually the wife of the president of the local cooperative is president of the auxiliary and wives of board members are included on the auxiliary board. Other women also serve on the board.

The board of directors of the auxiliary schedules its meetings to coincide with those of the cooperative board. They sometimes hold joint meetings.

During the annual meeting of the State association, delegates from the local auxiliaries meet and elect State officers. The State group then acts as liaison between the various local units and also between management and the local units, helping them plan programs and giving advice and encouragement.

**Activities Vary.**—Specific activities of the auxiliaries vary according to the interests and desires of the membership. One sponsors a yearly party for all employees and their wives; another sponsors a summer gathering for families of members and employees.

The auxiliaries are helpful in promoting annual open houses at the cooperatives. They help plan the programs, arrange for special activities and exhibits, and encourage members to attend.

The State association is now experimenting with a women's auxiliary newsletter, printed in the general office. This publication contains hints to homemakers, recipes, and suggestions on how farm supply specials can best be utilized, as well as news of auxiliary activities.

## Improving Facilities

Supermarkets learned long ago the importance of attractive surroundings to women customers. Cooperatives also are learning this—and that this is an area in which directors' wives can be valuable advisers.

## Better Housekeeping

One cooperative reports marked success with a "good house-keeping committee" led by a director and his wife.

At the committee's suggestion, the plant and offices were thoroughly cleaned and repainted; merchandise was rearranged; uniforms were provided for employees with the cooperative and employees sharing the cost; a landscaping plan was drawn up and planting started; and a cluttered lot was straightened up with road and service equipment lined up neatly instead of left helter-skelter.

Results of the committee's work have been rewarding. Not only has patronage increased but members have a different attitude toward the cooperative. They are taking a personal pride in it and refer to "our" facilities and "our" products.

## Educational Exhibits

Another cooperative suggests that director-wife teams, serving on a rotating basis, be placed in charge of an educational exhibit at the cooperative's headquarters. They are responsible for keeping the exhibit up to date and attractive and are expected to spend a few hours a day there, greeting members as they come in to trade.

Comfortable chairs near the exhibit give members a place to sit and relax a few minutes and a chance to become better acquainted with the director on duty. This sort of informal contact is valuable in building good member relations.

**It Does  
Public  
Relations**



The opportunities for a director and his wife to promote the cooperative in their home community are almost limitless. Here the member relations team really becomes a public relations team.

## Youth Activities

Many director-wife teams find it rewarding to work with young people in their community.

They can arrange for cooperative educational programs at community gatherings and in schools. Youth camps, demonstrations, quiz contests, and special farm programs all can be used to acquaint young people with cooperatives and what they mean to farmers and to the community.

Directors' wives often are particularly interested in working with girls in 4-H Clubs, while their husbands encourage boys to participate in 4-H activities.

## Talks, Tours, and Surveys

A board member and his wife in one midwestern town have set out to inform local merchants of the purposes and accomplishments of their cooperative. According to one of the leaders of the association, this has been beneficial in creating better understanding in the community.

Directors and members of another cooperative are forming teams to make "welcome neighbor" visits to all nonpatrons in the area. The cooperative held an open house earlier and these visits are followups.

## Special Meetings

Wives of directors in a rural cooperative held neighborhood coffees at a time when proposed State legislation would have created problems for their association. After they had heard a talk on the subject and discussed it among themselves, it was suggested that the women write their legislators. The hostess provided stationery and stamps for those who wished to do so.

A cooperative that elects directors by districts has a system of holding a community meeting in each district with the director and his wife in charge. As the member relations director says, "We take the meeting to the people."

The director's wife telephones cooperative members about the meeting. Then she and her husband visit each nonmember in the neighborhood and invite them to attend. These meetings have been very successful from a member relations and public relations standpoint.

## Tours

Tours of the cooperative's plant and facilities, with directors and wives assisting, give nonmembers a chance to see what the cooperative offers. (In an earlier section of this publication we

mentioned that several cooperatives provide similar tours for wives of members.)

A tour can be preceded by a short talk on the cooperative and can be followed by a social hour. This has been found to be a simple but effective educational program.

### **Surveys**

On various occasions, wives of directors have helped with worthwhile surveys and studies directly or indirectly related to cooperative work.

For example, a group recently worked with a State university on a research project called Operation Leadership. The women served as secretaries for six committees, kept the minutes, and wrote the final reports.

Directors' wives are excellent prospects for work in Rural Area Development programs. In a number of communities, they are helping with surveys and serving on local committees.

### **Informal Personal Contacts**

Directors and their wives usually have wide contacts in their community through churches, schools, and farm and civic organizations. Membership in these groups gives them many opportunities to promote their cooperative and to interpret it to others.

Every time they explain the real purpose of the cooperative to a friend, a neighbor, a business acquaintance—every time they point out how the entire community benefits from successful operation of the cooperative—they have improved its public image.

As one cooperative leader says, "The public opinion factor has become increasingly important in the business world. One of the most urgent problems facing cooperatives today is the need to create understanding and to communicate with others."

Directors and their wives, working together as a public relations and a member relations team, can be ambassadors of good will for all agricultural cooperatives.

## **Other Publications Available**

**Assuring Democratic Election of Cooperative Directors.** Educational Circular 21. Irwin W. Rust.

**Creating Training Programs for Cooperative Directors.** Educational Circular 22. Irwin W. Rust

**Using Cooperative Directors To Strengthen Member Relations.** Educational Circular 23. Irwin W. Rust.

**What Cooperative Members Should Know.** Educational Circular 24. Irwin W. Rust.

**Managing Farmer Cooperatives.** Educational Circular 17. Kelsey B. Gardner.

**Improving Management of Farmer Cooperatives.** General Report 120. Milton L. Manuel.

**Directors of Regional Farmer Cooperatives -- Selection, Duties, Qualifications, Performance.** General Report 83. David Volkin, Nelda Griffin, and Helim H. Hulbert.

**Bylaw Provisions for Selecting Directors of Major Regional Farmer Cooperatives.** General Report 78. Helim H. Hulbert, David Volkin, and Nelda Griffin.

**Planning and Conducting Annual Meetings.**  
Educational Circular 32. French Hyre and Irwin W. Rust

**Membership Practices of Local Cooperatives.** General Report 81. Oscar R. LeBeau.

**Making Member Relations Succeed.** Information 32. Irwin W. Rust.

A copy of each of these publications may be obtained upon request while a supply is available from --

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